Writing Edwardian Postcards: a tale of three Londoners

Julia Gillen

Literacy Research Centre

Department of Linguistics and English Language

Lancaster University

The postcard was very quickly adopted across Europe after its invention in 1869. In cities there were several deliveries a day, so that cards could be experienced as virtually synchronous. As the possibilities of using images increased and at least half of one side could be used for a message, the picture postcard became extremely popular after 1902. We have calculated from the Postmaster General’s reports that between 1902 and 1910 almost six billion cards were send in Great Britain. Released from the etiquette and obligations of formal letter writing, people took to exchanging brief, rapid, multimodal messages with a verve not to be seen again until the digital revolution.

In this paper I explore postcard writing and reading from a Literacy Studies perspective (Barton & Hall, 1999; Gillen, 2018). Our research questions include: What were the demographic characteristics of those who wrote picture postcards? What did they write about and how did they make use of the multimodality of the postcard? What were the standards of literacy across the social classes as evidenced by picture postcard use? In this paper I draw on postcards to three Londoners to illustrate some our findings. I combine textual and material analyses with an investigation of historical sources, including census records, to investigate how the postcard was used in London in the early twentieth century.

Barton, D., & Hall, N. (Eds.). (1999). *Letter Writing as a Social Practice*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Co.

Gillen, J. (2018). “I should have wrote a letter tonight:” a Literacy Studies perspective on the Edwardian postcard. In M. I. Matthews-Schlinzig & C. Socha (Eds.), *What is a letter? an interdisciplinary approach„Was ist ein Brief? — Eine interdisziplinäre Annäherung“* (pp. 123–140). Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann.